

Local orcas listed as endangered by feds

BY ELAINE WILSON, *American staff writer*
Wednesday, November 23, 2005

Noting that the region's killer whale population is at a greater risk of extinction than previously believed, the National Marine Fisheries Service announced on Nov. 15 that it has designated the Southern resident population of orcas as an endangered species.

The whales, also known as J, K and L pods, frequent the waters around the San Juan Islands from April through October.

Last year, Fisheries proposed listing the Southern residents as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act, meaning they were at risk of becoming endangered. However, after looking at such factors as the small number of males in the pods, Fisheries opted for the more serious designation.

"Recent information and further analysis leads our agency to conclude that the Southern resident killer whale population is at risk of extinction, and should be listed as endangered," said Bob Lohn, regional administrator for the Marine Fisheries Service's Northwest region, in a media release. "By giving it protection under the ESA, we have a better chance of keeping this population alive for future generations."

Shane Aggergaard, owner of Anacortes' Island Adventures whale charters and president of Whale Watch Operator's Association Northwest, said the listing will provide more money for whale research and education. He said that a recovery plan will be developed and critical orca habitat and food sources will be identified.

Aggergaard doesn't foresee any great changes to commercial whale watching, because charter company owners have been proactive about policing themselves. He said the association adjusts its guidelines annually to reflect the latest scientific research. He said that the association's standards have exceeded federal standards.

"We're far ahead of the game," he said.

In the 1970s, 45 Southern resident killer whales were captured for commercial display in aquariums. Eleven died immediately and 34 were removed. Photos taken by newspaper publisher Wallie Funk of a roundup in Penn Cove in 1970 galvanized public opinion against the capture of orcas in Washington, according to the Orca Network. The whales became protected under the Marine Mammals Act in 1972 and the captures stopped.

However, Fisheries noted, "The group continued to be put at risk from vessel traffic, toxic chemicals and limits on availability of food, especially salmon. It has only a small number of sexually mature males. Because the population historically has been small, it is susceptible to catastrophic risks, such as disease or oil spills."



Down to only about 70 whales in the early 1970s, the population rebounded to 97 in the 1990s but declined to 79 in 2001, according to Fisheries. The agency estimates the current population at 89 whales, including Luna, a young male that strayed and wound up alone in British Columbia. According to a Whale Museum list, J and K pods each have only one adult male and a few young adolescent males. L Pod has five adult males and several adolescent males.

The Southern resident pods spend most of the year in the waters around Vancouver

Island, the San Juan Islands and Puget Sound.

After Fisheries concluded in 2002 that listing under the Endangered Species Act was “not warranted,” the Center for Biological Diversity challenged the finding. The U.S. District Court told the agency to reconsider its decision. Orcas were added to the state’s

endangered species list by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife in April of 2004, then designated by Fisheries as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in December of 2004. The agency said that the endangered listing will provide greater protection.

“The new listing under the Endangered Species Act will

require federal agencies to make sure their actions are not likely to harm the whales. NOAA Fisheries Service said its ongoing efforts to restore salmon stocks in Puget Sound should benefit the whales. Other federal agencies’ efforts are likely to focus on toxic chemicals and vessel traffic,” according to the Fisheries release.